

Youth

"Let me help you, mom."

"No!"

"I'm not going to hurt you."

"No!"

"Jesus fucking Christ...Dad, you do it!"

I heard the slam of Grandmother Rosie's bedroom door; mother began to stomp to the kitchen where Denny and I were huddled together over scattered papers and folders of wedding plans. She stormed past the kitchen table and into the hallway, making the papers rise as if a perturbed force followed her wherever she went. Denny lifted his head with caution, and then returned to fumbling with his numerous, different sized camera lenses when he caught a glimpse of my mother's red face. The sound of mother's cigarette lighter clicked with desperation behind the bathroom door in the hallway as my grandfather Jim continued the fight:

"You gotta help me help you, Rose!"

"Mmmmmaaaaaaa!" Grandmother's cries echoed through the old farmhouse like a bear-trapped banshee.

"Just pivot, hon! You can move your right leg!"

"No, I can't! Damn you!"

I heard a glass on Grandmother's side table crash to floor, and a loud thud that shook the house to its core. I darted to the scene; Grandmother Rosie lost her balance and fell off the edge of the bed. Grandpa's fist desperately clutched her lacey under blouse, and his face was fatigued and defeated.

I quickly dove to the floor and inched my way to Grandmother Rosie's side. Denny crouched next to her. My hand tried to uncurl the hand that age had claimed. I looked up to see Grandpa Jim stumble backward to the bed, huffing and puffing in exhaustion. Seeing Grandmother Rosie on the floor, he stifled back a cry. He shuffled from the couch and into his study; Grandmother's eyes followed him like a lost child. I could hear Grandfather pulling his bible off of the shelf. I knew that he was looking at those pictures that he kept pressed somewhere in the beginning of Genesis, those pictures that he took of Grandmother Rosie at the local skating rink in 1963. If only he realized that she was there on the ground and not in those photographs. Grandma Rosie looked to me as the sweet and loving woman that I had known all my life, but the glow in her eyes was dim, floundering in the loss of peachy skin and sacred kisses on the neck. Mother stormed into the room, unapologetically, to grab the phone in order to call the medical aides; it was going to take at least five people to get her up. Denny's hand reached to the edge of my blouse as he exhaled with sympathy. All I could do was sit there in helplessness with grandmother's hand in mine. I gently grasped it, every crook, cranny, and vein the same. Her wedding ring and my engagement ring nudged like swans.

When the medical help arrived, they flooded into the house like white-suited worker ants. I thought ants were supposed to lift more than their own weight, but Grandmother Rosie proved me wrong. We all stood in the oak framed door way, watching her be pushed and prodded like a soulless thing. No sounds or words came from her mouth; it seemed as if she just stared at mother and grandfather with distance and contempt; the space between them seemed empty, no cord to attach their love and relation. I stared back at her, feeling as if I were the only one that understood her.

Denny seized my hand, pulling me in a swaying motion onto the porch, away from the commotion inside the house. He sat me down on the green painted steps and began fumbling through his bag of camera lenses. "Ah! Here we go!" Denny clipped the right sized lens on the front of his camera. His long fingers grappled around it to guide it in front of my face. "Now, smile!" He clicked the button and a flash went off. "I thought that we could take our own engagement photos...much more romantic don't you think?" He tried

to distract me from the stress that was inside the house. He raised the camera to my face again, so close that the lens touched my nose; I could see his wry smile behind it. I laughed and pulled away, fixing my hip-length brown hair and posing on the stairs like one of those pin ups from the forties. “Oh wonderful darling!” he mocked, showing me a beautiful effect of the evening orange sun on the small screen of the camera. “Now, let’s try this one...” Denny set one camera down on the steps and replaced it with short and squat one, a Polaroid.

Denny leaned back in his artistic manner, trying to get a “good angle.” I pushed out a cheesy smile, like one of those pictures from your childhood when your mom decided to give you a bowl of red staining strawberries during the summer. “Hey! Do it right” Denny laughed as he discarded that picture and pulled me close to him, catching our peachy faces in time. The Polaroid gracefully printed out the photo, a precious thing being born into the world. Denny wafted the developing picture in the air. “There,” he looked at the photo, held it up to the sun and placed it somewhere inside our book of wedding plans. Denny held the book to his chest as he looked out towards the sun, as if the picture had been placed on the horizon of the golden, setting disc. I thought of the grandfather’s photos in the bible, the way that grandfather snuck off to his study to look at them as if they were a form of pornography.

“Denny?” I asked, eyeing the book against his crisp blue dress shirt.

“Yes?”

“Have you ever thought about when we get...old?” I fumbled for words.

Denny shifted in his place, somewhat awakened from his thoughts of the golden sun.

“What about it?” He seemed to be cautious with his words.

“You love me, right?” I began to pry.

His eyes began to narrow with concern, and as his eyes drifted to the door of the house it began to make sense to him. He gathered his thoughts and swallowed before he began his words. “I don’t think we should worry about that now, Marie.” He half smiled. I kept a blank focus on the edge of the photo sticking out of the book.

“What will you do with that picture when I am no longer the way that I am?” I cocked my head to the side, hoping that Denny would come up with an answer that made me feel safe. Denny pulled the picture so that the whole thing stuck out of the book. He seemed to be at a loss for words.

“Are you not going to allow me to keep these pictures forever?” He questioned my investigation.

“No...I just want to know if you will be there when I am coughing and hacking my lungs out...”

Denny’s stance changed to that of a child, a child afraid to stand next to the bed of a dying grandparent. “I don’t want to think about it, Marie.” His face went cold and his puppy-like wonder had disappeared. Grandfather broke our conversation as he quietly slipped out of the house and onto the front porch swing, his bible in hand. He could tell that he had enough of Grandmother’s muffled screaming from inside the house; mother was obviously trying to get her to take her medication. Grandfather’s face was coated with a sick nostalgia as he opened to that page in Genesis. I left the porch, and left Denny with that cursed book of pictures.

I made my way back into the house. Grandmother’s screams provided me with my own haunting image of my future with Denny. He would be like Grandfather Jim, indulging in my company only through the pictures that captured the youth with which he used to be so in love. I cleared the table of the wedding plans and sat in silence. Was love an illusion? Was I to be treasured as a young peach, but shunned as a wrinkled raisin? This had always been in the back of my mind, ever since the day that I first introduced Denny to my family (he voluntarily helped with cleaning one of grandmother’s vomiting episodes). I questioned whether or not he knew what he was getting into.

I lifted my head to the sound of the screen door opening tenderly, casting the light of the sun onto the green table cloth. Denny took out the book of engagement photos and flipped them onto the table. He sat down across from me. With the most sincere and serious look on his face, he began to rip the photos to shreds.

“What are you doing!”

“Just wait...”

“I thought you wanted to keep those!”

“Nope.”

“What do you mean ‘no’?”

After destroying the vivid colored pictures of our faces, he took out the squat Polaroid, flashed it in my face, and wafted the developing image. A few seconds later, he tore it in two. He repeated, *flash, rip, flash, and rip*. Every picture born and then put in the past.